



FROM THE ANGLICAN ARCHBISHOP OF CAPE TOWN

The Most Reverend Dr Thabo Cecil Makgoba, DD(hc), PhD (UCT)

20 Bishops Court Drive
1001171
Claremont 7708
South Africa

TELEPHONE: 086

INTERNATIONAL: +27 21 763-1300

FAX: +27 21 761-4193

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My dear People of God

I have received the report of a Task Team I appointed in March of this year in terms of Canon 21.4 of church law to inquire into conflict within the Diocese of the Highveld, particularly between the Diocesan Bishop, the Right Revd Charles May, and a faction known as #SaveOurDiocese, which comprises a group of clergy and laity. The Task Team was headed by the retired Bishop of Pretoria, the Right Revd Jo Seoka.

The terms of reference mandated the team, firstly, to establish the veracity of allegations made against Bishop May by the persons who style themselves #SaveOurDiocese (or “Concerned Clergy”), and secondly, to inquire into the conduct of those making the allegations.

The allegations against Bishop May, which were shared on social media and relayed anonymously to the press, included claims that he had inappropriate relationships with the wives or ex-wives of clergy, that he protected a priest accused of sexual abuse, that he was suspected of embezzling church funds, and that he had stolen R5 million from a charity organisation and used the money to buy land for himself.

The Task Team reports that despite its repeated efforts to secure evidence from the #SaveOurDiocese group to substantiate their claims, they were unable to do so. It reports that the allegations of abuse were reported to the Safe and Inclusive Church Commission and to SAPS for investigation.

I note that the Task Team says that disciplinary proceedings against some members of the #SaveOurDiocese group, which include charges arising out of making the claims against the Bishop, should proceed. The Team reports that the charges “are serious and should follow the canonical process to conclusion. The length of time that this process has taken has had a negative impact on all parties.”

I am deeply pained that Bishop May and his family have been subjected to such unsubstantiated claims. I am also deeply pained at the spiritual and emotional damage that parties on both side of the dispute have suffered.

In its report, the Task Team deals at length with the conflict in the Diocese that these and other matters in dispute has generated. In its findings, the Team reports, inter alia:

“Our assessment is that drastic action is needed to break the impasse, and a basis needs to be found for the Diocese to be placed under administration for six months in order to implement the recommendations.

“The tactics and strategies being employed at present by parties is not in keeping with our church and need to be acted on decisively.

“Most of the people spoken to who do not identify as part of either group only desire for order and peace to be restored in order to serve and worship God peacefully. This is our duty to ensure.”

Thus, despite clearing Bishop May’s name over the allegations made against him, the Task Team has questioned elements of his handling of the conflict and has recommended that certain governance issues in the Diocese need attention. It has accordingly recommended that he take a sabbatical while an externally-appointed “implementation task team” led by two retired bishops addresses the situation.

However, the Team notes that such a step “would require some canonical gymnastics” – an implicit acknowledgement that such action is not provided for in the Canons (church law). Our Canon Law is the product of work by Canon lawyers of the wider Church over centuries, and in recent years, we have taken steps to ensure that its implementation is in accord with the principles embodied in South Africa’s newly-developed labour law.

In consequence, before initiating action I will seek to benefit from the wisdom of our Synod of Bishops, and the Metropolitan’s Executive of the Synod, as well as legal experts. I am referring the Task Team’s recommendations to our Canon Law team, headed by the Provincial Chancellor and Provincial Registrar, for legal advice, and to next month’s meeting of the Synod of Bishops for their input, including advice on the implications of the recommendations for situations in their Dioceses.

Among the recommendations and other matters on which I will seek advice, and initiate the necessary action, are the following:

- ☐ Recommendations that the suspensions of clergy and laity should be reviewed to ensure they were carried out canonically, and that consideration be given to lifting or amending the terms of suspensions;
- ☐ The position of a priest serving in the Diocese who was not ordained in the Anglican Church;
- ☐ Any further action that may be required or advisable under Canon 21;
- ☐ A recommendation that Bishop May should receive mentoring, guidance or further training;
- ☐ The appointment of an Independent Mediator to restore relationships between the Bishop and the clergy;
- ☐ Further education for clergy on the Canons and disciplinary processes, as well as the oaths that they have taken; and
- ☐ The holding of a retreat for clergy to reflect on the subject of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Since a recommendation that Bishop May should withdraw defamation lawsuits against clergy who made the allegations against him is not a matter of Canon law, I am referring that matter to him.

What I have outlined above constitutes a brief summary of the Task Team's report, which is available at the link below. Annexures to the report will not be released, since they contain evidence from individuals who were guaranteed confidentiality and contain unsubstantiated allegations of clergy misconduct, including sexual abuse, marital infidelity and financial mismanagement. Should Canon lawyers advise that any individual has a case to answer, details will be published when Articles of Presentment are heard by a Tribunal.

Jesus reassures us in John's Gospel (8:32), "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." We will work at pursuing the truths revealed in this process about the sad developments in the Diocese, recognising that any further delay addressing the matters at hand create the danger of exacerbating the situation. I am particularly impressed with the Task Team's proposals for training and education for the sake of the Gospel and God's people in the medium and long term. The Team's work has been very helpful in providing for us a mirror reflecting on how governance and mutual accountability are key, not only for the Diocese of the Highveld, but as a key understanding of episcopal governance and theology for all of us.

At a meeting with Diocesan leadership, the Task Team reports that it began with heartfelt prayers, seeking guidance and unity, followed by a reading from 2 Corinthians 5:17, which emphasizes the transformative power of faith in reconciliation with one another. The Team reports as follows (page 11 of the Report):

"The choice of this particular scripture was intentional, as we believed it would encourage the leadership of the Diocese to think deeply into the theme of reconciliation and new beginnings. The lesson was designed to challenge them to leave past grievances and focus on new approaches that would foster mutual acceptance and understanding, essential for addressing their differences constructively.

"Our primary objective was to facilitate genuine reconciliation among participants. We emphasized that one cannot claim to be reconciled with God while harbouring grudges toward fellow Christians. This attitude and such a position would only lead to self-deception. True righteousness, we noted, requires an earnest effort to mend relationships within the community, fostering a spirit of unity and love that reflects God's will. This understanding was crucial for their spiritual growth and for ensuring peace and cooperation in building the kingdom of God within the Diocese and the community at large."

I endorse the Task Team's words whole-heartedly, and on behalf of the Province, offer them our deep gratitude for their work.

God bless

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thabo Cape Town". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

LINK to report: <http://bit.ly/4leutXS>